

[Stonecutter--Drunk]

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STONECUTTER — DRUNK

In the back room of the Lambs' Club, a den of gambling and drinking, the little man lay on a soiled bed and stared at the ceiling. He was a granite-cutter but he hadn't worked for months. Instead he had been on one of his periodic drunks.

The front room was empty save for a man sleeping on the couch. Table and floor were littered with cigarette butts, newspapers, magazines. The screened-in gambling room was thick with smoke and rough voices. A green-shaded light cast its brilliance over the large round table and the cards. The hard faces of the players were in shadow. Brown beer bottles stood on the wood and the men tilted them from time to time. A running-fire of vile jokes without mirth and vicious profanity without meaning was kept up. A few on-lookers watched silently from the shadows. About the board were truck-drivers, stonecutters, bootleggers, professional gamblers, and loafers. Their voices were harsh and coarse, their laughter held no humor. Hands that were sinewy and grimy held the cards at the rim of the lighted circle. C-[???

The little man in the back room lay flat on his back and looked at the ceiling. The light showed a face that was still strong and fine. Time, hard work and dissipation had left surprisingly few ravages. Arturo was no longer young but his hair was thick and dark.

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Sweat glistened on his forehead, under the eyes, along the upper lip. Now and 2 then he moaned and twisted in his misery.

"I don't know how long I been drunk," Arturo said. Oddly he talked and looked quite normal. "I don't know when's the last time I ate something. All I know is I'm seeing things now. Seeing and hearing things, all kinds of things. So bad I'm afraid to close my eyes. Christ! So I leave the light on and look at the ceiling. Once in awhile I drink another bottle of beer. But it don't help me much any more." He scrubbed brow and eyes with the knuckles of one hand, a clean hand of grace and strength. Arturo had always been immaculate. He still prided himself on his appearance, good looks and good clothes. Even in the depths of debauchery he kept himself neat and clean.

I cut stone all my life and I drank all my life. Both will kill a man in his forties. And I've done plenty of both. It don't matter much which way you go. I'm over fifty now. Old... I don't look it? No, maybe not. But I feel it — inside... I'm a letter-cutter — when I work. It's fine delicate work. You got to have a steady hand and a sharp eye to cut letters. It's nervous work, it strains a man. After eight hours of that you need a drink, all right. You need a dozen drinks.

I don't know why I drink this way. I always have. I go along a year or so all right. Take a few at night, go to work in the morning. Then — I don't know — all at once I get started like this. God, it's awful. Three-four months, sometimes longer. Don't work, don't eat, nothing 3 but drink. Can't get away from it. Maybe in my blood, my father was the same way. But I don't try to blame him.

I guess I got nothing to hold me from drinking. This is the only home I got since my wife left me. The boys that run this place have been good to me. People say they're bad, but they're good to me. They help out lots of others, too. I've seen them. They help a lot more guys than the people that talk about them do, I know that. Maybe they gamble and drink and fight. Maybe they were bootleggers in Prohibition. They're men and they got hearts

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like gold. If you're down and out they ain't kicking in your teeth—they're helping you up. I ought to know.

My wife was a good woman but what a talker. What a tongue! My God, that woman's tongue. She got it from her old lady. Her old lady was the same way. Maddalena was beautiful when I married her though. The old lady didn't want her to marry me. We had to run away and do it. We had two daughters — I ain't seen them since they was small kids. They're both grown up and married. They say they're pretty girls, too. And I'm a grandfather now... My wife married another stonecutter. A good fellow, friend of mine, I feel sorry for him. A woman with a tongue like that is bad for any man. It goes all the time. It drives a man crazy.

But I'd like to see the girls. I think I saw the oldest one. When Joe Richarelli died a lot of people came up from Quincy. Joe did a lot for the Italians here, you know... I 4 was in the station when these people got off the train. I saw this girl and I got a funny feeling. You know, in my throat, up my back, and my heart went fast. It must have been Nina, the oldest. She's in Quincy. She was lovely — black black hair and blue eyes. My own daughter walking by not knowing me, not even seeing me. I felt bad. I felt bad a long time over that. I know it was Nina. She was with some of my wife's people. They didn't say hello either. Well, it don't matter... The girls are all right.

I saw my wife two-three years ago at a wake. She was fat. She had grown old. She tried to talk with me a little, but there was nothing to say. I got away as quick as I could. I went and got drunk with her husband instead.

I come from Tuscany — near Florence. I was young when my father and mother died. They left a little money. Everyone was going to America, so I went, too. I had relatives in Barre and I came to live with them — about 1900 or 1902, it was, 37 years ago. Some of them were cutting stone. I went into the sheds with them to learn the trade. The older men are dead now. The younger ones kept away from stonecutting — all except one boy. He

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cuts stone because he's got a wife and kids to support. He don't want to do it but he has to.

When I got married I was only nineteen — too young. But I thought I was a big shot, earning twelve-fifteen bucks a day. Imagine a kid nineteen making that money?... Maddalena's hair was red-gold, her eyes were blue. I wanted her and I took 5 her. But I was too young and wild to be married. I couldn't settle down. I wasn't made for married life. And she nag-nag-nagged with that tongue of hers. The more she nagged the more I drank. Finally she took the two girls and left me. She got married again pretty quick, she was still young and good looking. I didn't try it again — I had enough. Maybe I'd been better off with her — maybe worse — perhaps just the same. You can't tell about that. The way I took hasn't led far. But I've only had myself to hurt.

In the sheds it's pretty bad. The dirt floor is damp and wet, the sheds are cold in winter. There's always the dust and the noise. The noise bothered me worst of all, made ne crazy. I had to laugh once in awhile — my folks wanted me to be a musician. And I land in a stonished with hell's own racket busting my ears. It's a funny thing, this world, this life... All you go through and when you finish — what?

Arturo closed his eyes, covered them with his hand, and tried to relax. His bare arms and shoulders were still firm and strong. Great tremors swept his body making the blankets quiver. A sob broke from his clenched teeth. "When I shut my eyes they come back," he groaned. "I got to have another bottle of beer." He smiled when the bottle was in his hand. "Makes ne feel better just to hold it," he said. After a time he raised it high and let half the contents run down his throat. "What a man suffers," he said. "The man who drinks makes his own hell. When you get older you can't 6 take it."

To be young. To do a good day's work, then take a couple drinks, a bath, and dress in clean clothes. Dress up every night, eat a big supper, and go downtown. Hang around with the boys and watch the girls go by. Money in your pockets, nice clothes, good pals,

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pretty girls. It's your world then. You better take it — what else you got? Drink, dance, fight, make love, raise hell, and laugh. Get sick of one town, move on to another granite town, new friends, new girls, new places... That's when you are young. You don't give a damn for nothing. You don't want to. Afterwards you get troubles and worries enough.

Now I got to get over this. I got to sober up and get back to work — if I can get back in. I guess I can, they call me a good letter cutter. It'll take a few days to get onto my feet. It'll take a lot of suffering — but I'll do it. I always have done it. God, when I think of the time I've wasted in my life. Wasted my whole damn life, I guess... But I'm through this time, all through — for awhile. I'm going to sober up and cut plenty of stone. You wait and see.

Before you go will you open another bottle of beer for me? Thanks a lot. This one will put me to sleep — I hope.

Arturo lay back on the bed, the beaded brown bottle in his hand. The trembling had stopped now. But his eyes were still wide open and staring at the ceiling.